

Why Canadian CFFD Campaigns Are Worth Studying

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Campus fossil fuel divestment campaigns (CFFD) are seeking to convince universities across the world to divest their holdings in fossil fuel industry stock. These campaigns, which began in 2011, have produced a range of institutional responses from universities: ranging from dismissing the campaign to either formally accepting or rejecting the divestment petition. The empirical phenomena of interest are the cycles of action, response, and counter-response between university administrations and activist campaigns. These experiences are shaping the strategic choices and normative views of student activists engaged in the campaigns, and no systematic analysis has been conducted on what broad directions these campaigns are taking at various potential junctures in their interactions with university administrations. In particular, the relationship between the institutional responses and the strategies and tactics selected by campaigns (trending toward radicalization or institutionalization) is worth evaluating based on a representative sample of campaigns. There has been substantial overlap between the observed behaviour of CFFD campaigns and the behaviours and forms of institutional change theorized by Tarrow, Tilly, and McAdam. At the same time, CFFD campaigns have novel features in terms of their institutional setting and specific performances of contentious politics.

It's challenging to try to predict *a priori* how campaign events will impact the normative and strategic trajectory of those involved. In part, this is because activists hold and collectively develop differing conceptions of which objectives are most important. Certainly it seems likely that first-round campaign outcomes where divestment is accepted as opposed to rejected will skew the distribution of outcomes more toward those focusing on cooperative versus contentious approaches to convincing the university administration to divest subsequently. Other features of the campaign are also likely to be relevant, including the timing of involvement by faculty members and any decisions to form strategic alliances with other

on-campus social movements, particularly concurrent BDS campaigns.

Following the adoption of divestment as a tactic by Swarthmore Mountain Justice in 2011, CFFD campaigns have been initiated at universities around the world and over 100 educational institutions have committed to some form of fossil fuel divestment. These outcomes are important because of the rapidly vanishing adjustment time for creating a global energy system compatible with the 1.5–2.0 °C temperature targets in the Paris Agreement; because of the political reorganizations taking place in developed democracies confronted by the implications of climate change for their climate and energy policies; and because of how experiences with CFFD campaigns are shifting activist repertoires and theories of change.

The theoretical framework of contentious politics incorporates a range of elements which are naturally suited to the analysis of the CFFD movement. This theoretical framework is ultimately constructivist in nature: focused on understanding and evaluating frames about right conduct respectively promoted by activists and their targets. Key features of the framework include cycles of contention and protest as performance. The cycles of contention framework incorporates repertoires of contention (strategy and tactic selection, performing for an audience), mobilizing structures (organization of the movement, decentralization, diffusion of concepts and strategies), the construction of meaning (frames for climate change, language and its motivation), and the balance of opportunities and constraints (political opportunities, the effect of context on strategy success). The notion of repertoires is theoretically connected to the concept of “logics of appropriateness”, while cycles of contention can be understood as actions and interactions of agents within social structures which create and alter the normative context in which they interact, largely through deliberation about which frame of interpretation ought to be applied. These cycles can also be understood in terms of norm life cycles as theorized by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). New frames for evaluating relevant criteria for university investment decision making problematize intersubjective facts believed by various stakeholders about which factors must be taken into consideration and how decisions should be made. The contentious politics framework also considers effects on activist participants, theorizing that social movements can shift in four broad directions: toward institutionalization, radicalization, commercialization, and involu-

tion (a shift from external action to personal consciousness-changing). Some of the peculiar features of CFFD campaigns will cause them to diverge from the core predictions of contentious politics theorists.

Some scholarly work has already been published on the CFFD movement — principally accounts written by activists based on a methodology of participant observation. No study has sought to examine a representative sample of cases, though some (including Curnow and Gross (2016) and Bratman et al. (2016)) have theorized about the broad direction climate activist movements are taking in response, principally toward an emphasis on a “climate justice” frame and intersectional forms of organizing with other progressive social movements.

I suspect CFFD campaigns are diverging in terms of the extent to which they are becoming institutionalized compared to the amount they are becoming radicalized. This is because a concatenation of factors at some universities make them more inclined toward fossil fuel divestment (like small American liberal arts colleges) and others that make divestment petitions unlikely to succeed (like major ongoing financial relations with fossil fuel corporations). Campaigns that experience rejection will frequently respond by adopting contentious tactics of “escalation”, as specifically taught in 350.org materials. Rather than forcing divestment, the use of more contentious tactics will allow the university administration to more effectively dismiss the campaign as radical and deepen their commitment to a pre-existing framing that emphasizes a fiduciary duty to maximize investment returns as trumping any ethical objection.

Within university administrations, divestment campaigns will be interpreted largely on the basis of any divestment campaigns that set precedents (South African apartheid, tobacco, the arms trade, etc.) — though also from the perspective of public relations, the university’s branding, etc. In some cases, university administrations will be willing to cooperate with non-confrontational persuasion-based campaigns and commit to divest in some capacity fairly quickly. Each positive divestment precedent (especially at a prestigious university) will make it easier for CFFD campaigners to convince schools that were already inclined toward seriously considering action. However, each high-profile rejection helps justify fur-

ther inaction at resistant universities. We should therefore expect growing polarization as campaigns currently awaiting decisions see their petitions accepted or rejected.

Talking to as many organizers and divestment brokers (those actively transferring strategies and theories of change between multiple divestment campaigns) as possible will allow me to determine what sort of ideological and activist trajectory CFFD group members have followed as a result of their experience with fossil fuel divestment. In cases where groups have developed an ongoing non-confrontational relationship with a university's administrative structure, characterized by ongoing negotiations and activist demands being realized, campaigns can be said to have become more institutionalized. Campaigns that progress toward more contentious tactics (and which experience more internal contention as a consequence) can be said to have become more radicalized. These trajectories can be identified through close monitoring of campaign outcomes, consolidated into an event catalog in database form, as well as through interviews with activists and organizers, and the analysis of documents associated with campaigns, including the minutes of meetings, action agreements from acts of non-violent direct action and civil disobedience, and publications include divestment petitions, university responses, and strategic guidance from broker organizations including 350.org and the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition. Where they are willing, this evidence can be supplemented by interviews and documents provided by university administrations targeted by CFFD campaigns.

Appendix: Observed institutional outcomes

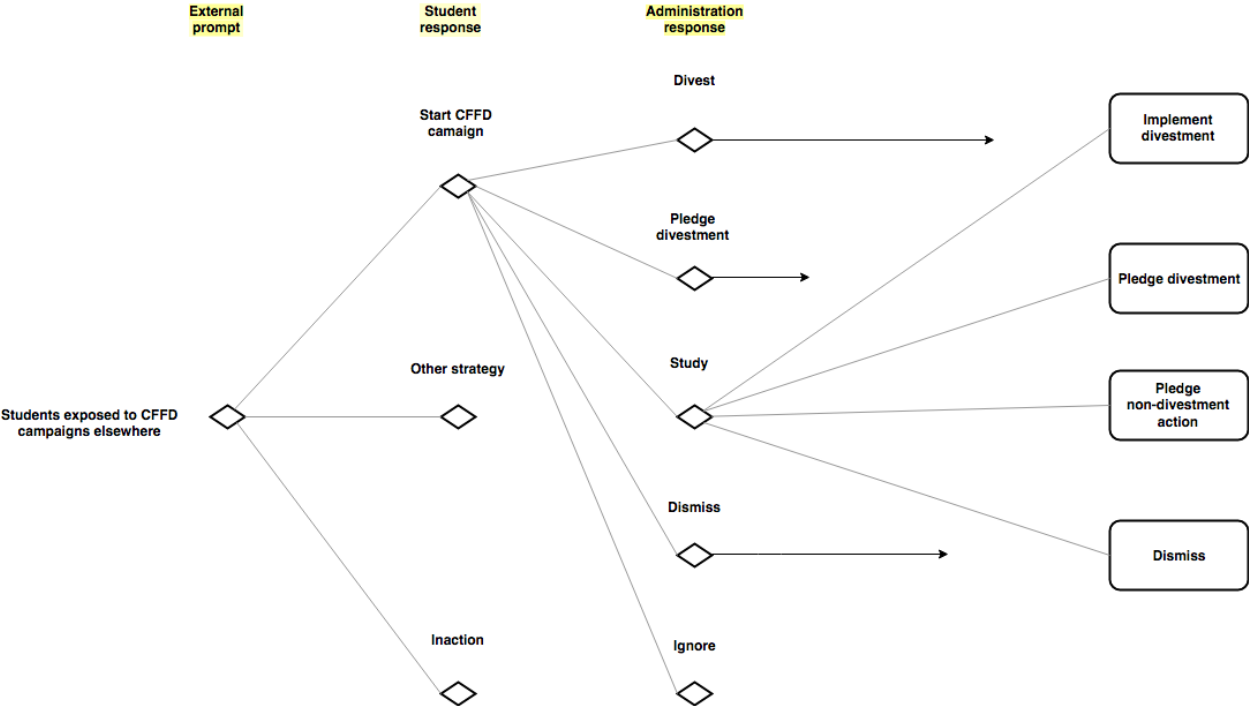


Figure 1: Observed institutional responses